

# THE MANDAEANS AN INDIGINOUS MINORITY

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mandaean, one of the oldest surviving ethno-religious groups, are indigenous to Mesopotamia, with roots in Babylonian civilization. Known for their Gnostic faith, the Mandaic language, and reverence for running water, they honor John the Baptist and embody a synthesis of Babylonian traditions with the teachings of the Nasoraeans.

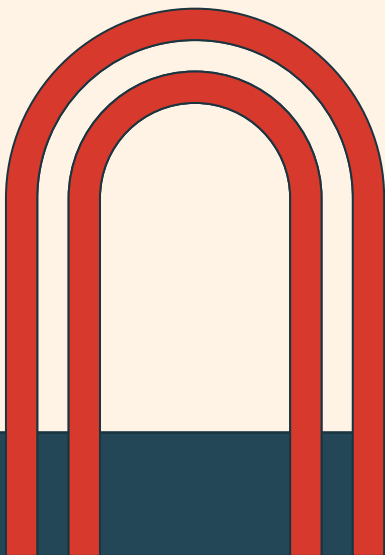
Decades of violence and displacement, exacerbated by the Iraq War and ISIS, have reduced their population in Iraq to fewer than 10,000, threatening their survival. Recent government efforts to reclaim stolen lands and encouragement of minorities to return, offer hope but require robust action to ensure safety and cultural preservation.

The Mandaean call for safe zones near rivers in both northern and southern Iraq to rebuild their community, recognition as an Indigenous Babylonian group, and support for preserving their language and heritage. The global community must act to protect these ancient people and their vital contributions to human history.

# HISTORY

The Mandaean are a direct link to the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, arising as an indigenous Aramean population closely tied to the Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian civilizations. Centered along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, their identity is rooted in the languages and rituals of their Babylonian ancestors. Their sacred language, Mandaic, is a form of Eastern Aramaic & is closely tied to the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmud & the Syriac Language of their northern neighbors, the Assyrians.

During the era of Late Babylonian prominence, the Mandaean flourished as custodians of unique spiritual traditions, preserving a monotheistic Gnostic worldview that combined Babylonian cosmology with their own doctrines of purity and enlightenment. Their theology was further enriched during Late Antiquity, when merging with the Nasoraeans brought new dimensions to their beliefs, including a profound reverence for John the Baptist as a spiritual guide. This synthesis established the Mandaean as both a religious and cultural bridge between ancient Babylonian practices and the Nazarene traditions that went on to form the early Christian church.



# CHALLENGES

Throughout their history, the Mandaeans have been vulnerable due to their pacifist traditions and distinct religious identity. The ambiguity in Islamic texts regarding their status as "People of the Book" left them exposed to periodic violence and discrimination. The post-2003 Iraq War ushered in an era of lawlessness and sectarian conflict, during which the Mandaeans were disproportionately targeted, their communities decimated, and many forced to flee.

The rise of ISIS brought unparalleled devastation. The group explicitly declared Mandaeans as infidels, subjecting them to violence, forced conversions, and displacement. Many sacred sites were desecrated, homes destroyed, and families scattered. By the time of ISIS's defeat, the already dwindling Mandaean population in Iraq had reached critically low numbers, with fewer than 10,000 remaining.

A significant portion of the Mandaean population now resides in the diaspora, particularly in Europe, North America, and Australia. While these new environments offer safety, they also pose unique challenges. The dispersal has fragmented the community, making it difficult to maintain traditional practices and pass on cultural knowledge. Access to Mandaean clergy, necessary for the performance of key religious rituals, is severely limited, further threatening the preservation of their faith.

The erosion of the Mandaean language, Mandaic, is a pressing concern. Listed as a critically endangered language by UNESCO, its survival is at grave risk as younger generations face limited opportunities to learn and use it. This ancient dialect, once central to their spiritual and communal life, is losing prominence within the community. Compounding this is a growing identity crisis among Mandaean youth, many of whom lack access to the resources and knowledge necessary to understand their true roots. As a result, an increasing number identify primarily as "Arab" or "Iraqi," further diluting the distinct cultural identity of the indigenous Mandaean people.

# KEY FACTORS

## **Identity Struggles:**

Mandaean youth in Iraq face marginalization due to societal discrimination, limited recognition of their heritage, and a lack of governmental support or educational resources, leaving them disconnected from their roots.

## **Mental Health Challenges:**

They suffer mental health challenges like PTSD and depression, worsened by resettlement struggles and intergenerational tensions, further threatening their well-being.

## **Destruction of Heritage**

Mandaean heritage has been devastated by persecution and extremist violence, including ISIS attacks that destroyed sacred sites and forced conversions. The government's inaction has accelerated the loss of their cultural traditions.

## **Ongoing Persecution & Displacement:**

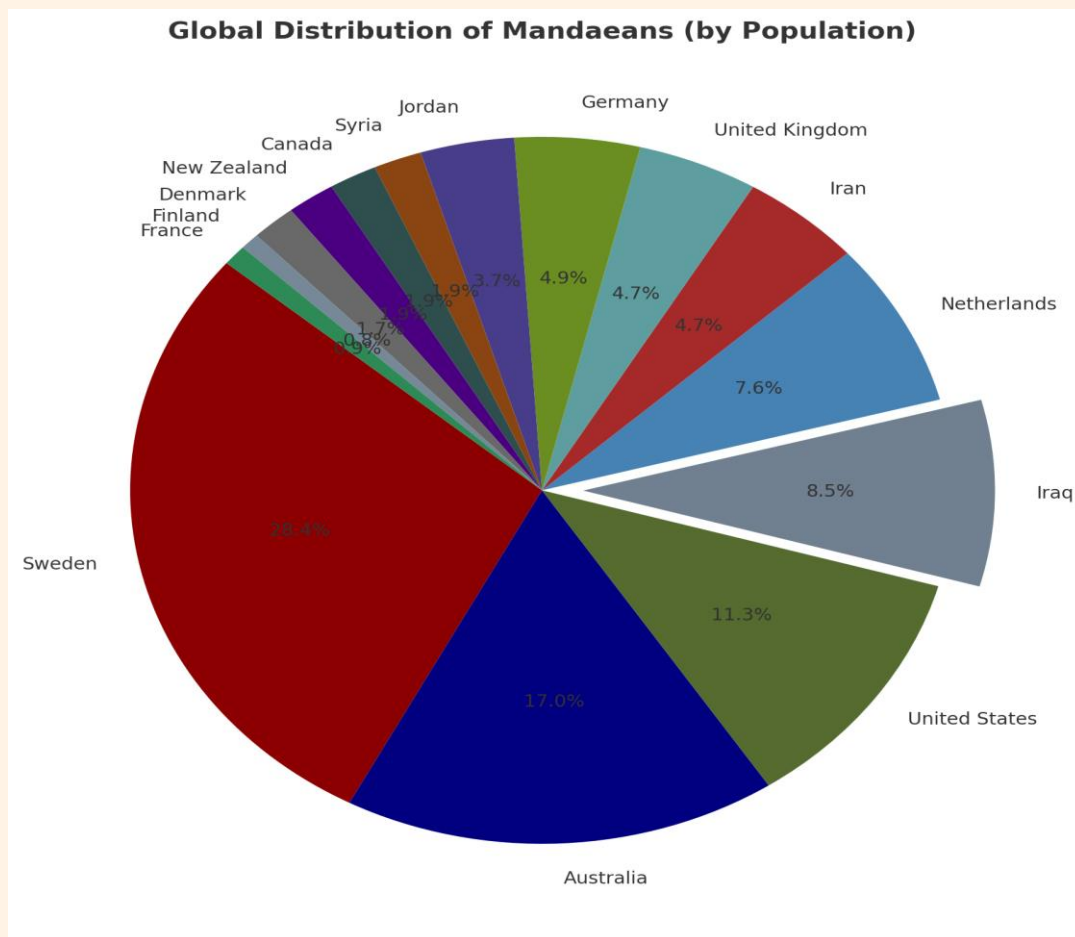
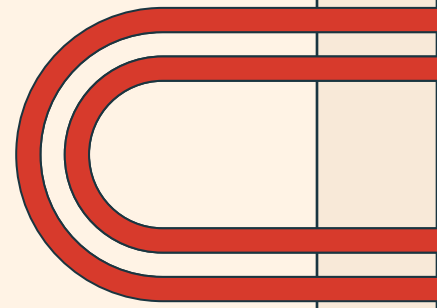
Ongoing violence, extortion, kidnappings, and forced displacements by extremist groups have drastically reduced Iraq's Mandaean population, pushing many to flee. These challenges underscore the urgent need for their protection and support.

### **Relevant Links:**

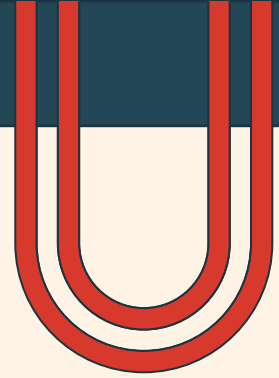
<https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/download-1468-from-crisis-to-catastrophe-the-situation-of-minorities-in-iraq-english.pdf>

<https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/threats-iraqs-communities-antiquity-testimony-dr-suhaib-nashi>

# VISUAL DATA



# CALL TO ACTION



The Mandaean struggle for survival and recognition as an indigenous people is directly aligned with the principles outlined in the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)**. Almost every article within the Declaration resonates with the challenges faced by the Mandaeans, including the preservation of their culture, language, and spiritual practices amidst ongoing persecution and displacement. However, the most relevant provisions include **Article 8**, which protects against forced assimilation and cultural destruction; **Article 13**, which emphasizes the right to revitalize and transmit endangered languages and traditions; and **Article 25**, which underscores their spiritual connection to vital natural resources like rivers, essential for their religious rituals. These articles collectively highlight the urgent need for international mechanisms to safeguard the Mandaeans' rights and ensure their cultural and spiritual survival for generations to come.

## ARTICLE 8 – PROTECTION AGAINST FORCED ASSIMILATION

The Mandaeans have faced decades of forced assimilation and cultural destruction, especially in Iraq and Iran, where their language, religion, and traditions have been systematically suppressed. Article 8 of UNDRIP is particularly relevant as it protects indigenous peoples from actions aimed at depriving them of their cultural values or ethnic identities. For the Mandaeans, this includes the loss of their sacred rituals, forced displacement from their ancestral lands, and efforts to erode their unique identity. The article provides a framework for advocating redress and mechanisms to prevent further cultural and spiritual erosion.

## ARTICLE 13 – RIGHT TO LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

The Mandaean language, Mandaic, is critically endangered, with few speakers left to preserve its oral traditions, philosophies, and sacred texts. Article 13 of UNDRIP emphasizes the right of indigenous peoples to revitalize and transmit their languages and cultural practices to future generations. This article highlights the importance of state and international support in preserving Mandaean linguistic heritage through education, community programs, and cultural initiatives, ensuring that this vital aspect of their identity is not lost.



## ARTICLE 25 – SPIRITUAL CONNECTION TO LAND AND RESOURCES

The Mandaean spiritual and cultural practices are intrinsically tied to their access to rivers, particularly for their baptismal rituals, which are central to their religion. Article 25 of UNDRIP recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to maintain their spiritual relationship with traditionally used lands and resources. For the Mandaeans, this article underscores the importance of protecting access to rivers and preserving their environmental integrity, ensuring that their religious practices can continue uninterrupted and be passed on to future generations.

### Proposal for Mandaean Cultural Preservation and Recognition

- The Mandaean people, an indigenous community of Iraq with roots deeply embedded in Mesopotamian history, seek cooperation with the Iraqi, Kurdish, and international governments to preserve and rebuild our culture, language, and way of life. Recognizing Mandaeans as an indigenous people of Iraq is a critical first step in safeguarding our heritage. We speak a Babylonian dialect of Eastern Aramaic, and our genetic and archaeological evidence demonstrates clear continuity with ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. For example, the Aramaic Uruk incantations, which evolved into the magical text corpus of late antiquity—including Mandaic lead rolls and incantation bowls—illustrate an unbroken cultural and linguistic lineage in Iraq and Iran.
- We propose collaboration with these governments to allocate small areas of land in northern Iraq (Kurdistan) and southern Iraq to establish designated villages or hubs. These areas will house Mandaean temples, schools, and cultural centers with access to rivers, essential for our religious practices. Such spaces will serve as cultural and spiritual sanctuaries, enabling us to rebuild our identity, language, and traditions while also benefiting the local economy through tourism and development. These initiatives will create jobs, foster cultural exchange, and encourage sustainable growth for the surrounding communities.
- We also seek the support of the international community to aid in the revitalization of the Mandaean language through online classes and programs that can engage and educate the youth, particularly those in the diaspora. The international community has a moral and legal obligation to act in accordance with the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)** to protect this endangered group. By preserving the Mandaeans, the world safeguards a living link to Mesopotamia's rich and diverse heritage.